

Start of "compromat" battles opens the 2002 election campaign

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Actually, «compromat» is a derivative from the French word «compromettre» that means «show somebody in an unfavorable light», «undermine someone's reputation, authority», «blacken someone's good name», «dishonor someone». All these negative definitions of «compromat» are likely to be at work during the election campaign and cause the whole variety of attitudes. Quite often, the use of dirty techniques that comprise an integral part of «compromat» resembles specific «actions of war» between subjects of the «conflict».

A new pre-election «compromat war» started in Ukraine on January 9. The first blow was made in the format of a mini-version of the «tape scandal». Chairman of the Rukh-Press, former secretary to late leader of the Rukh Vyacheslav Chornovil and the current spokesman of the Rukh «For Unity» (routinely known as «the third Rukh» or «Boiko's Rukh») released a taped telephone conversation, allegedly, between Nasha Ukraina leader Victor Yushchenko and mayor of Kyiv and leader of the «Yednist» party Oleksandr Omelchenko. In the conversation that allegedly took place on December 13, 2001, the voices that resemble those of Yushchenko and Omelchenko discuss the issue of dismissing leader of the SDPU(o) Victor Medvedchuk from his position of the First Vice Speaker of the parliament of Ukraine. The tape presents the men speaking as initiators, and their supporters as performers of the collection of signatures in the Verkhovna Rada in favor of putting the vote on dismissing Medvedchuk on the Rada's agenda.

«After I gave the material, so to say, for moral assessment to the Rukh «For Integrity in Politics», and I noted the following: the tape came from the sources that had received guarantees of journalist ethics and, for the sake of personal security of the sources, neither their names nor addresses would be disclosed in the press» (Novyi Kanal, «Reporter», January 9, 2001). He did not specify how legal the method of making the recording had been. Meanwhile, according to the Supreme Court of Ukraine, the institution that is authorized to sanction specific conversations in cases envisaged by the law, it never received any formal «materials for issuing permissions for listening to telephone conversations of the city chairman of Kyiv Oleksandr Omelchenko or leader of the Nasha Ukraina block Victor Yushchenko (www.ukrop.com, January 10, 2002).

The situation unfolded according to stylistics of a political soap. Victor Yushchenko refused to comment on either the contents of the tape or the fact of making it public. «I do not want to comment on things which for me, for considerations of principle, are unethical and incorrect,» he said, - «for an honest person this incident gives yet another reason for correct choice of the forces that stand for fair and transparent elections,» he added (Ukraina Moloda, January 11, 2002) Oleksandr Omelchenko reacted rather emotionally: he said he intended to take the case of listening to his telephone conversation with Victor Yushchenko to court. By doing so Omelchenko, in fact, publicly admitted that the conversation had taken place and that the tape was genuine. On January 10, member of Omelchenko's Yednist faction in the parliament, Oleksandr Zadorozhnyi, told the political portal part.org.ua that «the meeting of the Yednist faction listened to explanations of the head of the faction who confirmed that yes, the conversation had taken place.»

Oleksandr Omelchenko did not specify whom he intended to sue but announced that the Social Democratic Party (United) (SDPU(o)) had been at war with the Kyiv city authorities for the recent three years - probably, keeping in mind the unpleasant circumstances of the 1999 election campaign for the position of the mayor, in which Omelchenko, the incumbent, was challenged by an SDPU(o) leader Grigory Surkis as his main competitor. Omelchenko also argued that in the conversation with Yushchenko he had expressed his own position regarding the former First Vice Speaker of the parliament Victor Medvedchuk and [that he] did not deny it» (Den, January 11, 2002).

Medvedchuk, having heard the allegations, briefly noted that he had heard «nothing new in the disclosed records»: «Both [Omelchenko and Yushchenko] had been directly involved in my dismissal» (Ukraina Moloda, January 11,

2002).

The disclosure of the tape raised a new wave of mutual suspicion and accusations. The statement issued by the Party of Reforms and Order read that «There are no more doubts in the Ukrainian public as to who ordered major Melnychenko's tapes. The orderer is the same, only performers differ!» The statement issued by the party that is one of the founders of the Nasha Ukraina has a remarkable title: «Whose Social Democratic Hat Has Caught Fire?» Deputy chairman of the Party of Reforms and Order Serhiy Sobolev publicly argued that «the story of the Omelchenko-Yushchenko tapes is an extra proof of key orderers of the «tapegate» (www.korrespondent.net, January 10, 2002).

The SDPU(o) responded with a statement that it «strongly dismisses all accusations to its address and announces that it has nothing to do whatsoever either with the audio recordings or their disclosure.» Judging from the text, the party was prompted to make that statement by the «hints to the involvement of the SDPU(o) in organizing the scandal, linked to the disclosure of elements of the audio recording, provided by director of the Rukh-Press agency Dmytro Ponamarchuk.» The party also stressed that «any allusions aiming at discreditation of the party, groundless accusations and lies will be settled in court in accordance with the current legislation (part.org.ua, January 11, 2002).

The Nasha Ukraina election block also threatens to file a lawsuit. Interestingly, the mock «tapegate» happened exactly when the founding parties of Nasha Ukraina signed joint statements declaring its official birth. Nasha Ukraina demands litigation on the fact of unauthorized listening to telephone conversations by Victor Yushchenko, according to the block's campaign manager, leader of the Solidarity party Petro Poroshenko. Furthermore, head of the parliamentary committee for fighting organized crime Yuri Karmazin announced he would personally ask the Office of Attorney general to start investigation into the case. «We must know who listened and who ordered [it],» Karmazin voiced the wish that is unlikely to come true (www.korrespondent.net, January 10 2002).

One of the developments of the «tapegate» was the decision of the Deputy Attorney General and Attorney for Kyiv Yuri Gaisinsky to open a criminal case following the fact of unauthorized listening to the conversations between Omelchenko and Yushchenko. Thus, the «compromat war» entered its new phase, related to litigation.

The disclosure of the tape gives a chance to focus on at least some related aspects that have ethical and legal dimensions. One of the aspects of the case, the issue of morality in politics, has been broadly debated since the times of Makiaveli. In this case the question is not the contents of the taped conversation, but the fact of the recording in general and in the context of the election campaign in particular. It is a matter of general knowledge that the Rukh «For Unity», with which Dmytro Ponamarchuk is linked, may be interested in doing its best to weaken Nasha Ukraina as its key competitor in the race. The connection is so obvious that the «People's Rukh of Ukraine» – a newly-formed block of the Rukh «For Unity» that seeks to capitalize on the Rukh's brand name – urgently published a statement refuting its involvement in the case. «The statement of Dmytro Ponamarchuk about the scandalous telephone conversation between Yushchenko and Omelchenko has nothing to do with the position of the «People's Rukh of Ukraine», for no political decision has been made to that end. That is the point of view of Ponamarchuk who is not an official figure either of the party or the block,» announced co-chairman of the «Rukh «For Unity» Georgy Filipchuk (www.korrespondent.net, January 10, 2002).

Another issue is how unprotected Ukrainian citizens and institutions must feel, regardless of their positions and political preferences. The case has demonstrated, once again, that confidential conversations in this country are anything but confidential. Hence, everything you say may be heard and used against you. This is a rather serious symptom, characteristic of the current situation in Ukraine. However, on January 11, the security services hurried to announce they had nothing to do with this case. Press secretary of the SBU Marina Ostapenko strongly denied allegations that her agency was involved in the case. The Ministry of the Interior also, according to Minister Yuri Smirnov, «has nothing to do whatsoever» with it (Inter, Podrobnosti, January 11, 2002). Hence, we have another puzzle with some missing fragments.

Yet another issue is how the «compromat» is perceived by the society. Possibly, this case will show that the society is tired of the «tape scandals» and mutual accusations – though here we are dealing with a mock «tape scandal» that can hardly be compared either in terms of the scale or the issues involved to the last year's «tapegate». It is unlikely that the case will have any serious societal implications or damage the reputation of the individuals whose alleged voices are heard on the tape. Instead, the case has created a good chance to engage in a discussion about morality in

politics.

The conversation, however, clearly demonstrated the current mechanism of political decision-making in Ukraine. While not a pleasant sample, it represents a rather typical technique that can hardly surprise the public – particularly those unimpressed with the real tape scandal.

In a sense, the public attitude to the case can be explained in terms of general public apathy to the political process. During the 1997-1998 election campaign, long before the 2000-2001 «tape scandal», the «compromat» was far from publishing private conversations. Then, the society was presented with «scandals» involving the reconstruction of the Ukraina palace, Pavlo Lazarenko's dacha, Minister Kravchenko's buildings and Yulia Tymoshenko's money-bags. The contents of the stories could be actually touched and seen. Nowadays, the technique build on more «sophisticated» things.

In 1997-1998, the media and bureaucrats repeatedly predicted that the 1998 parliamentary elections would be the «war of compromat». Nteworthy, the claims reached their high without actual «compromat» being spread. As then Secretary of the national Security and Defence Council Volodymyr Horbulin put it, «the election campaign can transform into a «war of compromats» with the only rule: the more dirty the better» (Fakty i Kommentarii, November 13, 1997). This view was developed by Leonid Kravchuk, who argued that the dirt was equally damaging to all participants of the dirt-casting game. However, the criticism of the «war of compromats» looked rather hypocritical, as some of the most vehement critics used "«ompromat"«quite successfully. The whole process looked like politicians sought to prepare the society for expectation of a massive national swearing contest while officially stating that stories about «the war of compromats» were made up by some «destabilization forces». Head of the State Security Service, SBU, Volodymyr Radchenko, who has survived several election campaigns, once said in an interview: «It is impossible to surprise our people with much of what is considered [to be «compromat»], the people are simply used to that» (Zerkalo Nedeli, November 15, 1997). Today, as several years ago, the question is why they are used to it? Is that because that's happening all the time? «The war of compromats» was there, and some participants of the election process challenged their rivals quite openly through the media, but the «war» did not grow up to anything more than a «game» and was perceived by the society as such. Notwithstanding the frequent disclosures of «compromat» about «bad» parties and politicians, corruption and power abuse, there was no explosion of the «compromat bomb» in the society. As Volodymyr Radchenko put it «everybody has got used to the information that someone has stolen a plan».

To illustrate the controversial nature of «compromat» in the context of its perception by the society, we may refer to radical Dmytro Korchynsky: «... if you say to anyone that a minister steals, [the news] will have no effect! Nobody will believe that [the minister] does not steal, this is known to everyone in advance, even if [the minister] is the most honest person» (Stolichnye novosti, July 10, 2001). Hence, one needs to distinguish between two things: a real event that was kept silent for a while but then presented with all possible exaggerations as «compromat», and pure «compromat», based on misinterpretation of facts that looks like casting dirt on a (potential) competitor. The process of preparing such «servings» is rather simple. As Leonid Kravchuk put it, commenting on «compromat wars» of 1997-1998, all one needs is «to find out about some decree, resolution or order, and present it as a civil servant's attempt to do something in favor of a specific company or political party, having decorated it with allegations of bribery and power abuse.» Kravchuk described the technique as «the war of dung-guns» (Kievskie Vedomosti, November 29, 1997).

This kind of compromat may be defined as distorted interpretation of a fact with a clear aim of covering the opponent in dirt by means of exaggeration or direct lie. This method was widespread in the previous election campaigns, but this time more «sophisticated», information and «black PR»-based methods are likely to be used – mainly in the form of «contributions» to the media, «hot» tapes and other potentially politically explosive materials. However, their effect will be reduced due to the fact that the «addressees», i.e., voters, will become increasingly bored.

Obviously, the events of January 9 are just the beginning of the «compromat wars», and a lot more are there in stock for us to hear, see and read during the election campaign. The question of how true that information does not seem to matter to those who prepare it: «compromat wars» are not supposed to be based on realism. Hence, we may agree with one of the actors of the recent tape, Speaker Ivan Pliushch: the tape released on January 9 is «just the beginning», and «everything is still ahead: something under the sofa [a reference to the recorded under President

Kuchma's sofa that allegedly recorder his conversations related to the «Gongadze scandal»] and something under one's ear» (Interfax Ukraina, January 9, 2002), as the experienced Speaker put it. Ukrainian politicians know what they are talking about...